

The corruption watchdog condemned – the media criticised in letters to the editor

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Media treatment of political corruption remains an under-researched academic topic, despite newspapers devoting considerable space to allegations of wrong-doing by public figures. This paper looks at the media's coverage of the Metherell affair in NSW as judged by readers in the letters to the editor columns of four newspapers. The study found that readers were not only interested in corruption, but that they use the letters to the editor columns of newspapers to participate in the debate over the labelling of conduct and the consequences that should be applied. Significantly, the study also found that letter writers tended to be more critical of the coverage of this issue by the media, including named journalists and organisations, than they were of the views of fellow readers.

In June 1992 then New South Wales Premier Nick Greiner and his Environment Minister, Tim Moore, were found to have acted corruptly in appointing former ministerial colleague-turned-independent MP Dr Terry Metherell to a lucrative public service position so as to clear the way for a by-election in his seat of Davidson. (They were subsequently cleared.) In his report, the head of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), Ian Temby QC, highlighted the role of the media in a democracy, particularly as an anti-corruption mechanism. Pointing to the large number of letters to the editor published on this issue, he said: "It did not take long for

the media to work themselves into a lather of righteous indignation, although it does seem that on this occasion the public led and they [the media] followed” (ICAC 1992, p.4).

While the role of the media as an anti-corruption mechanism has been dealt with elsewhere (Tanner 1998, 1999; Doig 1983; Masters 1992; Dickie 1990; Simons 1991), little attention has been paid to the role of letters to the editor columns as a forum through which readers can discuss the media’s treatment of this issue. In Australia, letters to the editor columns are one of the most popular and widely read sections of a newspaper (Schultz 1996, p.17). Letters to the editor pages are important for a number of reasons. They provide a barometer of public feeling on issues, and act as an important feedback mechanism for the newspaper, letting journalists and management know what readers feel about issues, including their own handling of those issues. These pages also provide a forum through which readers can debate issues with each other.

Corruption is by its very nature an emotive topic. There is disagreement among academics as to what actually constitutes corruption and the impact of such conduct on society (see, for example, Heidenheimer et al 1990). This disagreement can also be seen in the wider community and between elites and non-elites. Because of this, it would be expected that a corruption scandal — particularly one involving a high profile political leader — would attract considerable coverage not only in the news pages, but in the letters to the editor columns as well. One reason for this is highlighted by Gronbeck, who argues that people “demand to participate in [the] ritualistic deposition” of those who have been accused of corrupt conduct (1978, p.156). In fact research conducted by the NSW ICAC shows that people believe writing a letter to the editor is one way in which they could respond to corruption (1996, p.14).

While popular, these columns have also been widely criticised by readers who have been known to adopt a proprietorial air when it comes to the letters page and the contents thereof (Kelleghan 1995, p.8). For example, newspapers are often criticised for being biased in their selection of letters, for not publishing letters, for refusing readers

a right of reply and for editing contributions from readers.¹ Newspapers generally publish only a small proportion of the letters they receive from readers.² When selecting letters for publication, editors apply some of the same criteria as they do for news pieces. These can include newsworthiness, the contribution the letter makes to a debate, its length, coherence and whether it is libellous or not (Kirkman 1998, p.1).

A number of researchers have sought to profile letter writers in an attempt to determine whether the views they express are representative of the wider community. According to Fowler, letter writers constitute a self-selected rather than random sample, and the attitudes expressed “would be more likely to be more strongly held, better expressed and more negative than those of the average member of the community” (1981, p.43). In an earlier study Davis and Rarick concluded that letters to the editor provide “the irate, the antagonist, the displeased, a chance to speak out and be heard” (1964, p.108), although as Bogart has found, editors tend not to discriminate against letters holding a view contrary to that of the paper (cited in Pritchard and Berkowitz 1991, p. 390).

The purpose of this study is to analyse the public’s reaction to the coverage of the Metherell affair in four newspapers — the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), the *Daily Telegraph Mirror* as it was (DTM), the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR). The paper is not so much interested in whether newspaper coverage of an issue is influenced by contributions from readers, this issue being addressed in a larger project the author is currently undertaking. Rather, the paper examines:

- (1) the level of criticism or support individual journalists and media organisations receive in letters to the editor columns;
- (2) whether readers tend to focus more on news or editorial columns; and
- (3) the extent to which readers use these columns to engage in debate with each other.

Given what has been said previously about letter writers, it is hypothesised that letters to the editor on this issue are more likely to be critical than approving in their response to coverage and that there would be a healthy exchange of opinions between correspondents.

Furthermore, it is expected that letter writers are expected to respond to both news articles and editorials, the determining factor being their content.

These papers were selected for a number of reasons. The *SMH* was an obvious choice, being the main quality daily in NSW. The *DTM*, on the other hand, provided an obvious contrast, as NSW-based and popular, with the second-largest daily circulation in Australia. In the lead-up to the period covered by the Metherell affair, the four newspapers enjoyed the following circulation: *Australian* (148,574); *SMH* (267,267); *DTM* (491,197); and *AFR* 76,673 (Australian Press Council 1992, pp.154, 163). While the *SMH* is a broadsheet, the *DTM* is a tabloid. Given the different reputations that broadsheets and tabloids generally enjoy, the former tending to be regarded as “quality” publications, the latter as “popular”, it is tempting to hypothesise that their coverage of the inquiry would differ substantially and that the responses of letter writers may also vary. The *Australian* and the *AFR* were selected because they are national dailies and hence may be inclined to take a broader, less state-centric approach to their coverage of the appointment. The *AFR* was also chosen because of the interest it had shown in Nick Greiner’s managerialist approach to government during his term as NSW premier. While the broadsheet versus tabloid dichotomy again shows up in the choice of these two newspapers, in this instance it is potentially less meaningful, given that the broadsheet *Australian* and the tabloid-sized *AFR* are both recognised as ‘quality’ publications.

Background to the Metherell affair

At the time of the Metherell appointment, Greiner led a minority government that had to negotiate its legislative program with five independents, including Metherell. The latter’s appointment to the public service paved the way for a by-election the Greiner Government won, although leaving it still in a minority position. Greiner’s involvement in the appointment incurred the wrath of the remaining independents who demanded that unless he and Moore resign as premier and minister respectively, they would support a change of

government. The independents were incensed in part because Greiner had won office in 1988 on a platform that included a pledge to clean up public sector corruption. Greiner's promise had also been interpreted to include opposition to jobs-for-the-boys style appointments, a label subsequently applied to the Metherell appointment. In their appearances before the ICAC and during negotiations with the independents, Greiner and Moore both denied that their conduct was corrupt. However under the peculiar definition of "corrupt conduct" contained within the ICAC Act, their conduct was so classified. Greiner and Moore immediately appealed the finding to the NSW Court of Appeal, arguing that their conduct was no different to that of Greiner's predecessors as premier and that it did not amount to corruption as the term was popularly defined. Despite their appeal, the independents called for their resignations. Greiner and Moore succumbed to the independents' demands, even though they were subsequently cleared of corruption by the NSW Court of Appeal.

Media coverage

The Metherell affair attracted enormous media coverage. The four newspapers selected for this study published 940 articles and 293 letters to the editor on this issue over a four-and-a-half month period (Table 1). (All articles and letters were sourced from the one edition of each newspaper. In each case this was an edition that was readily available outside NSW. While clearly there are disadvantages with such an approach, in that the reader is not able to follow changes in editorial emphasis which may occur over editions throughout the day — in the case of articles if not letters to the editor — it does nonetheless provide for a certain consistency across the data.)

Given the small time frame involved (four and a half months from the announcement of Metherell's resignation from Parliament and appointment to the public service to Greiner's resignation as a member of parliament), it was decided to include all letters to the editor in the study.

Table 1: Distribution of letters & articles compared

News- paper	Total letters		Total articles		% difference
	No.	%	No.	%	
SMH	145	49.48	374	39.78	+9.70
DTM	100	34.12	256	27.23	+6.89
Aust.	46	15.69	243	25.85	-10.16
AFR	2	0.68	67	7.12	-6.44
Total	293		940		

As Table 1 shows, the Metherell affair certainly provoked interest among readers of three of the four newspapers studied — the *SMH*, *DTM* and *Australian*. The small number of letters published in the *AFR* is perhaps indicative of its different focus, although it can be argued that the *AFR* tended to publish fewer articles in total on a daily basis than the other newspapers. Significantly, the percentage contribution of letters to the editor on this issue, compared with articles, was down in both the national dailies. Whereas the *SMH* published almost 50 percent of all letters analysed in this study and the *DTM* nearly 35 percent, the *Australian* and the *AFR* published fewer than 16 percent and one percent respectively, a much lower contribution than their share of total articles.

Despite this, however, the Metherell affair was of sufficient interest to readers in other states to provoke letters to the editor from them. This is highlighted in Table 2 which traces the origin of letters on a state-by-state basis. This suggests that while the particular incident was focussed on NSW, the issues being addressed were of much wider concern. In fact, a number of the letters on this issue that originated outside NSW compared the Metherell affair with other similar incidents involving public figures in those states. There were also a small number that drew comparisons with incidents that occurred overseas.

Table 2: Origin of letters by state

	NSW	VIC	WA	QLD	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
SMH	143	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
DTM	99	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Aust.	23	7	4	8	3	0	1	0
AFR	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total	266	7	4	10	3	0	3	0

As Table 2 shows, the overwhelming proportion of letters to the editor on this issue were from NSW. This is not surprising, as it reflects the state focus of the issue. What is significant, however, and perhaps reflects the strength of community concern about ethical issues involving MPs, is the fact that the Metherell affair did attract letters from correspondents in other states, particularly among readers of the *Australian*.

As Table 3 reveals, the letters to the editor columns were used mainly by members of the public to participate in the debate over the Metherell affair. Nearly 93 percent of published letters were from people who professed no political, professional, academic or journalistic interest in the issue. Of the professionals who had letters published, two were concerned about the impact of the appointment on public attitudes towards the EPA,³ two engaged in an interdisciplinary debate over legal representation,⁴ one was a letter of advice from a retired public servant who said he could have told Greiner quickly how to resolve his problem,⁵ and a response to a letter from Opposition leader Bob Carr which sought to discredit Greiner's achievements as premier.⁶ The letters in the political category included federal and state MPs,⁷ a mayor,⁸ a former federal president of the Liberal Party,⁹ a union official,¹⁰ and a party official.¹¹ Letters in the academic category included historians and political scientists.¹²

Table 3: Identity of letter writers

	SMH		DTM		Aust.		AFR		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Citizen	134	92.4	97	97.0	40	87.0	1	50.0	272	92.8
Political*	3	2.1	3	3.0	4	8.7	1	50.0	11	3.8
Profess- ional	5	3.4	0	0	1	2.2	0	0	6	2.0
Academic	3	2.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1.0
Journalist	0	0	0	0	1	2.2	0	0	1	0.3
Total	145		100		46		2		293	

* This includes MPs, local government representatives, union officials, and people holding positions in political parties.

Acknowledging the media

There were 92 letters to the editor (31.39 percent of the total) that acknowledged or responded to journalistic contributions or other letters to the editor on this issue (see Table 4). By far the greatest influence on letter writers appeared to be journalistic contributions. Across the four newspapers 79 letters (27 percent) acknowledged the influence of the media, compared with just 13 (4.4 percent) which directly responded to other letters.

Table 4: Responses to the media and other letter writers

	SMH	DTM	Aust.	AFR	Total
To specific articles	19	5	6	2	32
To that newspaper generally	3	2	0	0	5
Other media/ media generally*	18	5	18	1	42
To other letters	5	1	7	0	13
Total	45	13	31	3	92

* Other media category includes specific references to news items in other media and the media generally.

As Table 5 shows, more than 52 percent of letters to the editor on this issue published in the *Australian*, and nearly 28 percent of *SMH* letters were written in response to, or acknowledged, journalistic contributions or the role of the media generally. The response rate in *DTM* letters was much lower at 12 percent, while both *AFR* letters acknowledged identified articles. The response to other letters was relatively low. The greatest reader to reader interaction appeared to take place in the letters to the editor column of the *Australian*, where more than 15 percent of letters acknowledged that they were responding directly to comments made by other readers. Of the 247 letters to the editor published in the other three newspapers only six acknowledged that they were in response to other letters. Of those who did acknowledge other letters, all were critical of, or took issue with, comments made by the writer of the particular letter. Only one¹³ acknowledged that the other letter writer¹⁴ had made some valid points.

Table 5: Responses as a percentage of individual newspaper totals

	SMH	DTM	Aust.	AFR	Total
To specific articles	13.1	5.0	13.0	100.0	10.9
To that newspaper generally	2.1	2.0	0	0	1.7
Other media/media generally	12.4	5.0	39.1	50.0	14.3
<i>Sub total (media)</i>	<i>27.6</i>	<i>12.0</i>	<i>52.2</i>	<i>150.0*</i>	<i>27.0</i>
To other letters	3.4	1.0	15.2	0	4.4

* Note the sub total for the *AFR* adds up to more than 100% because one letter referred to both a specific article and the media generally.

One conclusion to be drawn from this is that letters to the editor were of little acknowledged influence on the majority of letter writers, although it is difficult to argue this authoritatively. For example, it is difficult to predict what proportion of letters to the editor on a particular issue are published, and whether there is an attempt on the part of the editor, conscious or otherwise, to provide a balanced cross-

section of the views aired in letters.¹⁵ Certainly in this case there appeared to be little dialogue between writers.¹⁶ This suggests that letters columns provide less of a forum for reader to reader exchanges than they do for readers to respond to journalistic contributions. The full break-down of responses to journalistic contributions is contained in Table 6. It shows that readers of the two Sydney dailies divided their responses almost equally between the newspaper in which their own letter was published and other media. In the case of the *SMH*, 22 out of 40 letters (55 percent) responded to pieces in the newspaper of publication, compared with 18 letters (45 percent), which dealt with contributions in other media or the media generally. This compared with a 58.3 percent (7 out of 12) response rate to pieces in the *DTM* by *DTM* readers, 25 percent (6 of 24) in the *Australian* and 100 percent (2 of 2) in the *AFR*.

Perhaps significantly, of the letters which responded to the newspaper of publication, the overwhelming proportion identified the article with which they took issue or supported. In the case of the *SMH*, this was 86.4 percent (19 of 22 letters), 71.4 percent in the *DTM* (5 of 7), 100 percent in the *Australian* (6 of 6) and 100 percent in the *AFR* (2 of 2). Those letters which responded to specific articles in the newspaper of publication did not focus on a particular type of article. As the final column in Table 6 reveals, there were 32 articles in this category, with 11 responding to news pieces, 11 to editorials and 10 to comment pieces. None responded to or acknowledged cartoons. There was no noticeable trend either within or between the newspapers. That is, letter writers seemed to respond to comments in editorials, news and comment pieces alike.

While it can be argued that, based on the above breakdown, readers seem more inclined to use the letters to the editor columns to respond to journalistic contributions, the level of acknowledgment is still relatively low. To illustrate, fewer than 11 percent of all letters on this issue responded to specific articles in the newspaper of publication, 1.7 percent to that newspaper generally, and 14.3 percent to other identified media or the media generally. That is, fewer than 27 percent of letters admit an intellectual debt (positive or negative) to the media.

Table 6: Responses in letters by type of article/journalist or media organisation

	SMH		DTM		Aust		AFR		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>(1) Specific articles</i>										
News	8	5.5	1	1.0	1	2.2	1	50.0	11	3.8
Opinion	5	3.4	1	1.0	4	8.7	0	0	10	3.4
Editorials	6	4.1	3	3.0	1	2.2	1	50.0	11	3.8
Sub total	19	13.1	5	5.0	6	13.0	2	100.0	32	10.9
<i>(2) That paper generally</i>	3	2	2	2.0	0	0	0	0	5	1.7
Sub total	3	2.1	2	2.0	0	0	0	0	5	1.7
<i>(3) Other media / media generally</i>										
TV	*3	2.1	3	3.0	^11	24.0	0	0	17	5.8
Radio	**1	0.7	1	1.0	0	0	0	0	2	0.7
Print	***2	1.4	#1	1.0	^^1	2.2	0	0	4	1.4
Not specific	12	8.3	0	0	6	13.0	1	50.0	19	6.5
Sub total	18	12.4	5	5.0	18	39.1	1	50.0	42	14.3
Total (all)	40	27.6	12	12.0	24	52.2	3	150.0	79	27.0

* One of these letters refers simply to “television” and “TV” without identifying the program.

** The letter referred to herein does not refer to a specific radio program or station.

*** These letters refer only to a “newspaper” and “headlines”, rather than to a specific article or newspaper.

This letter refers to “in the paper”. Whilst it is tempting to place it in the *DTM* general category, the possibility of cross media readership precludes this.

^ The letters in this category refer either to a specific program or to the presenter thereof.

^^ This letter refers simply to “editorials across the country”.

If the other media/media generally category is set aside, it can be seen that fewer than 23 percent of letters to the editor published on this issue acknowledge the influence or contribution of an identified media organisation, journalist, commentator, or another reader/writer. As Table 7 shows, this represents just 67 letters to the editor — 29 in the *SMH*, 24 in the *Australian*, 12 in the *DTM*, and 2 in the *AFR*. As a proportion of total letters published by each of the newspapers, the *AFR* was the highest at 100 percent¹⁷, followed by the *Australian* at 52 percent, the *SMH* at 20 percent and the *DTM* at fewer than 12 percent.

Table 7: Letters which identify a specific article/journalist/organisation

	SMH	DTM	Aust	AFR	Total
Specific (to newspaper)	22	7	6	2	37
Other identified media (By program/journalist)	2	4	11	0	17
Responding to other Letters	5	1	7	0	13
Total	29	12	24	2	67

Finally, writers responded to a small number of articles and letters. For example, in the case of the *SMH*, the six writers who responded to editorials were in fact responding to only four of the 17 editorials published on this issue by the *SMH*. Of the six responses, three responded to one editorial (May 7)¹⁸, and three to three other editorials (June 20,¹⁹ August 3²⁰ and August 14²¹). The eight *SMH* letters which acknowledged particular news items all wrote in response to separate news stories,²² while the five letters which responded to opinion/comment pieces were in fact responding to just two articles. One was a response to a column by Tony Stephens on May 13,²³ the other four to a column by Gerard Henderson on June 23.²⁴ In Henderson's case, he was not a staff journalist, but an independent commentator who wrote weekly articles for the paper. Given that there were 374 news items, opinion/comment pieces, editorials and stand-alone cartoons published in the *SMH* on this issue, it appears that in terms of overall

influence, specific articles appeared to have little direct (or acknowledged) effect on letter writers. That is, just 14 of 374 *SMH* articles (representing 3.7 percent) were acknowledged by writers.

Of the six letters published in the *Australian* which acknowledged identified contributions from that paper's journalists/columnists, four referred to single items (a news article published on June 20-21,²⁵ an editorial on June 25,²⁶ and comment pieces published on April 14²⁷ and May 4²⁸). The only multiple response came in the form of two letters to a column written by political scientist Malcolm Mackerras published on June 20-21.²⁹ So again it can be argued that on the part of readers of the *Australian*, there was little acknowledged response to identified articles or letters. The five articles acknowledged and responded to in the letters to the editor column of the *Australian* amounted to just 2 percent of that newspaper's total on the Metherell affair (243).

The five *DTM* letters which referred specifically to *DTM* articles, identified five individual pieces. The five articles mentioned included three editorials (June 12³⁰ and 25³¹ and August 24³²), one news item (April 16³³) and one column (June 22³⁴). These articles represented 2 percent of total *DTM* articles (256). Letters published in the *AFR* which identified particular *AFR* articles responded to one editorial (June 22³⁵) and one news item (June 24³⁶). The two articles represent 3.2 percent of total *AFR* articles on this issue.

Positive or negative reactions to the media?

Overall, the media received a bad press in letters to the editor. Of the letters to the editor on this issue which mentioned the media, 40 could be classified as negative, 6 as positive and 14 as neutral. A newspaper by newspaper breakdown is provided in Table 8.

There were few bouquets for the media or for journalists generally. *SMH* letter writers focused on a number of aspects of the media's coverage of this issue. One writer reminded fellow readers of the media's coverage of former Labor leader Bill Hayden's appointment as Governor General. He said:

I do not recall the mass media reacting with shock, horror and outrage and being manipulated into creating mass hysteria in the reading public, as we are now subjected to as “this week’s agenda”.³⁷

Table 8: Categorising letters which mention the media

	SMH	DTM	Aust.	AFR	Total
Positive	3	0	2	1	6
Negative	14	11	14	1	40
Neutral	11	0	3	0	14

However not all writers necessarily believed that the media was doing the manipulating. Another *SMH* reader suggested that journalists had in fact been manipulated by Opposition leader Bob Carr. The writer described *SMH* journalists as “kindergarten Marxist[s]” who “continue to pursue every hare” set by the Opposition leader.³⁸ In an appeal to the *SMH*’s then major shareholder, s/he urged: “Please Conrad, introduce some heavyweight journalists who can address issues of public policy with some semblance of balance and equity.”³⁹

This letter provoked a response from another writer who criticised the *SMH* for being “so conservative”.⁴⁰ Two *SMH* letter writers were critical of the media for portraying political leaders in a light that could deter young people from seeking public office.⁴¹ While the first writer referred to the media generally, the second had responded to a particular *SMH* editorial which he said “contained the unfair presumption that all politicians in NSW are potential thieves and robbers, just awaiting the opportunity to rip the public off”.⁴²

The criticisms continued with the release of the ICAC report, with one reader questioning why journalists had not highlighted Temby’s recommendation “that consideration should [not] be given to action to dismiss the Premier or the minister”.⁴³ S/he asked the question: “In their haste to produce headlines, did they not read to the end of the report?”⁴⁴ The same concern was evident in an exchange between P. J. Ashcroft and J. C. Cooke in the letters column of the *SMH*. The

former expressed concern that allegations made at an ICAC hearing were “readily printed and reported with total immunity”.⁴⁵ Responding to Ashcroft, Cooke argued that the former’s comments were illustrative of a “common tendency of commentators to refer to what the report contains without having read it”.⁴⁶ Of *SMH* readers who responded to editorials, one described the article to which he was responding as “one of the silliest and least thoughtful in *Herald* history”,⁴⁷ the second labelled the editorial which prompted him to write as “the ultimate in the journalistic mania for demeaning those in public life”.⁴⁸

Three of the four responses to Gerard Henderson’s article were likewise critical of the author’s arguments.⁴⁹ However Henderson did receive support from one writer, who suggested that the funding currently set aside for the ICAC be redirected to the Sydney Institute, which Henderson headed, so as to “mitigate a good dose of trial by media”.⁵⁰ In a more general sense, there were also plaudits from one reader, who said that she could not “wait to get my next enthralling instalment in the *Herald* each morning”.⁵¹

Perhaps highlighting the competitive nature of the media industry, a number of newspapers ran criticisms of competitors or journalists working for other media organisations. One major focus of such attention was ABC Television’s *7.30 Report* host Quentin Dempster who had been implicated in the affair when Metherell informed the ICAC that he had given his personal diaries to Dempster for safe keeping. Metherell’s diaries became a focus of the ICAC’s inquiry when it was revealed that they were highly scathing of a range of prominent political figures, including Greiner.

Whereas only one *SMH* article had focused on Quentin Dempster’s involvement in the Metherell appointment and resignation, this was the main issue among *Australian* letter writers who commented on the role of the media. Ten letters to the editor published in the *Australian* were critical of Quentin Dempster’s coverage of the appointment or his role therein.⁵² This “flurry” of letters provoked a response from Dempster himself, in the form of a letter to the editor in which he attempted to rebut the criticisms and to lay the blame at the feet of the politicians involved.⁵³

Other *Australian* letters were critical of individual articles by journalists,⁵⁴ of the media's fascination with the money paid to Metherell⁵⁵ and of the media's coverage of the Metherell affair generally. For example, one writer was critical of the media for adopting "double standards".⁵⁶ He said that in its coverage of the Gair affair, the media had regarded as the villain "the person who so cleverly thwarted the purpose of that incident [Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen] and not the person who made the offer [prime minister Gough Whitlam]".⁵⁷ The writer, Mark Cooray, was even more critical of the media's coverage of, and involvement in, the Metherell appointment, describing it as "unprincipled, malicious, hypocritical and pathologically biased ... a few exceptions apart".⁵⁸ Cooray accused the media of conducting an "unremitting campaign against Greiner" and said that the ALP "would have got nowhere without the support they received from the media".⁵⁹ He said that had a similar appointment been attempted by former Labor premier Neville Wran it would have "died in a few days".⁶⁰ He argued:

If an ALP Premier or Prime Minister were in the same position as Greiner, the majority of journalists would have been providing support and excuses.⁶¹

Cooray's criticisms were not solely directed at the media. He was also critical of the Government for its handling of the issue and of the independents for their actions. Despite its content, Cooray's letter provoked just one response — from Hobbins — who suggested that Greiner's fall was not due to "media vindictiveness" as Cooray had contended, but rather the independents.⁶² Also, there was one letter which applauded an article written by Malcolm Mackerras on this issue and published in the *Australian*.⁶³

Of the letters published in the *DTM*, three were critical of Dempster,⁶⁴ and one was critical of radio commentator Alan Jones.⁶⁵ Four articles criticised the *DTM* for its coverage of the Metherell appointment and aftermath. One was critical of the *DTM* for publishing claims by the Premier's wife that Metherell was a "drama queen" on page 1, the writer arguing: "[h]er opinions mean nothing to me. No-one voted for her so why should she be on the front page."⁶⁶ The second criticised columnist Sue Williams for her portrayal of

Greiner's justifications, arguing: "[h]ow is a man supposed to look when he is accused and convicted by a press that, in most part, hasn't read the Temby report in full?"⁶⁷ A third writer described as "absolutely terrible" the *DTM*'s treatment of Nick Greiner, arguing that any Labor politician in the same position would have acted accordingly.⁶⁸ Finally, the *DTM* was criticised by non-aligned independent Peter Macdonald for its editorial which criticised his role in Greiner's resignation.⁶⁹

Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis of the Metherell affair. Firstly, the study suggests that readers are interested in such issues — highlighted by the sheer volume of letters published. Secondly, that letter writers are not unwilling to criticise the efforts of journalists and media organisations. In fact, coverage of this issue suggests that readers are more likely to use the letters to the editor columns to take issue with arguments posed by a journalist or media organisation than they will the musings of a fellow correspondent, although even these are not immune from criticism. It also shows that readers are equally critical of editorials as they are of news pieces and columns from non-journalist contributors. However overall, the study shows that readers are more likely to use the letters to the editor columns to participate in the issue than they are to criticise either fellow readers or journalists. Third, the study shows that newspapers are prepared to publish letters that take issue with their own editorial stance or the performance of identified staff journalists and commentators. That is, they appear to see letter to the editor columns as an opportunity for readers to engage or participate in debates.

This study also gives some support for the arguments put forward by Fowler, Davis and Rarich and others that readers who write letters tend to be outspoken and opinionated. (This will be further tested in a separate content analysis of the letters currently being undertaken by the author.)

Finally, the study sheds some light on the competitive relationship between media organisations. It shows that while they are willing to print criticisms of themselves and their own staff, they are equally prepared to publish criticisms of competitors.

Notes

1. According to the Australian Press Council, nearly 5 percent of reader complaints relate to the non-publication or editing of letters. See <<http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/complaints/stats99.html>>
2. For example, in the mid 1990s the *Australian* published on average 10 percent of the 80 — 110 letters a day it received. See Kellaghan 1995, p.8.
3. N. Pain, Principal Solicitor, Environmental Defender's Office, Sydney; Peter R. Smith, President, Environment Institute of Australia, Sydney. Pain's letter was published in the *SMH* on April 15, 1992, 10. Smith's letter appeared in the *SMH* on April 16, 1992, 12.
4. See J. R. Marsden, President, Law Society of NSW, letter published in the *SMH* on May 13, 1992, 12; and the rejoinder by J. Coombs, QC, President of the NSW Bar Association, on May 14, 1992, 12.
5. K. G. Harrower, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22.
6. R. W. Turner, Secretary, State Bank of NSW, letter published in the *Australian* on July 1, 1992, 16.
7. These included Clover Moore (*DTM*, June 24, 1992, 35); Bob Carr (*Australian*, June 26, 1992, 15; *DTM*, July 10, 1992, 32); Peter Macdonald (*DTM*, August 25, 1992), Senator David Brown (*Australian*, July 1, 1992, 16); Senator Karin Sowada (*Australian*, May 12, 1992, 10); and Stephen Mutch, MLC (*Australian*, May 7, 1992, 10). There was also a letter from former NSW Premier, Barrie Unsworth, the man Greiner defeated to win office in 1988 (*SMH*, June 23, 1992, 16). However Unsworth did not reveal his former political affiliations.
8. G. Nolan, Mayor of North Sydney, letter published in the *SMH*, May 16, 1992, 28.
9. J. Valder, *AFR*, July 2, 1992, 15.

10. J. Sutton, Assistant national secretary, Construction, Forestry, Mining Employees Union, letter published in the *SMH* on May 16, 1992, 28.
11. E. Sydney-Jones, Treasurer of Clover Moore's campaign fund, letter published in the *SMH*, June 30, 1992, 12.
12. In the former category was J. W. Knott (*SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22); and in the latter M. Mackerras (*SMH*, April 16, 1992, 12); and E. Chaples (*SMH*, May 9, 1992, 26). Interestingly, two other academics, H. K. Colebatch (*SMH*, August 25, 1992, 12) and L. J. M. Cooray (*Australian*, June 29, 1992, 8) also had letters published on this issue, but did not identify their professional interests.
13. B. Hobbins, *Australian*, July 3, 1992, 10.
14. L. J. M. Cooray, *Australian*, June 29, 1992, 8.
15. Although the *SMH* does provide readers with some insights into the quantity and tenor of letters through its weekly Postscript column.
16. The only exception was an exchange (mainly one-sided) between Pat Rogers and the presenter of the ABC's *7.30 Report*, Quentin Dempster. Dempster was identified during the ICAC inquiry as a confidant of Metherell's. In fact the inquiry heard that the Metherells had dined at Dempster's house and that Metherell had entrusted a copy of his diaries to Dempster for safekeeping. Dempster said that he had returned the diaries to Metherell when asked to do so and that he did not take the opportunity to read them. Letter writers focused on these facts and also an apparent warning from Dempster to Metherell "Don't trust the Hungarian," which was contained in the diaries. Rogers, who was highly critical of Dempster's role in this affair and his on-air performances, had letters published in the *Australian* on April 27, 8; June 24, 12; and July 13, 8. Dempster ultimately responded to Rogers by way of a letter which was published in the *Australian* on July 8, 14.
17. But note the small number involved.
18. E. Chaples, *SMH*, May 9, 1992, 26; C. Thompson, *SMH*, May 9, 1992, 26; J. R. Marsden, *SMH*, May 13, 1992, 12.
19. K. Taber, *SMH*, June 23, 1992, 16.
20. P. J. Ashcroft, *SMH*, August 6, 1992, 10.
21. K. R. Doyle, *SMH*, August 21, 1992, 8.

22. R. Quilty, *SMH*, April 25, 1992, 24; R. Bryden, *SMH*, May 8, 1992, 12; N. Pilkington, *SMH*, May 13, 1992, 12; G. Johnston, *SMH*, August 6, 1992, 10; R. Hodge, *SMH*, August 25, 1992, 12; M. Mackerras, *SMH*, April 16, 1992, 12; A. Leigh, *SMH*, June 23, 1992, 16; J. Wilson, *SMH*, June 27, 1992, 22.
23. G. Nolan, *SMH*, May 16, 1992, 28.
24. J. W. Knott, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22; M. Lynch, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22; A. F. Parkinson, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22; T. Flew, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22.
25. S. Black, *Australian*, June 20-21, 1992, 14.
26. B. Carr, *Australian*, June 26, 1992, 16.
27. N. R. Churches, *Australian*, April 22, 1992, 10.
28. S. B. Mutch, *Australian*, May 7, 1992, 10.
29. G. W. Roberts, *Australian*, June 23, 1992, 12; A. Burns, *Australian*, June 30, 1992, 12.
30. C. Moore, *DTM*, June 24, 1992, 35.
31. B. Carr, *DTM*, July 10, 1992, 32.
32. P. Macdonald, *DTM*, August 25, 1992, 8.
33. J. Marshall-Orr, *DTM*, April 25, 1992, 17.
34. L. Joyce, *DTM*, June 23, 1992, 26.
35. D. Svenson, *AFR*, June 25, 1992, 17.
36. J. Valder, *AFR*, July 2, 1992, 15.
37. H. Graham, *SMH*, May 1, 1992, 10.
38. P. Murphy, *SMH*, May 20, 1992, 12.
39. *ibid.*
40. This writer actually identified himself as a socialist. See D. Goldstein, *SMH*, May 27, 1992, 14.
41. R. Lusby, *SMH*, May 23, 1992, 24, and K. Doyle, *SMH* August 21, 1992, 8.
42. The editorial was "Ensuring more honest politicians," *SMH*, August 14, 1992, 8. The letter, by Doyle, was published in the *SMH* on August 21, 1992, 8.

43. D. Williams, *SMH*, June 24, 1992, 14.
44. *ibid.*
45. P. J. Ashcroft, "Strong feelings about ICAC's powers," *SMH*, August 6, 1992, 10.
46. J. C. Cooke, *SMH*, August 14, 1992, 10.
47. E. Chaples, *SMH*, May 9, 1992, 26.
48. K. Doyle, *SMH*, August 21, 1992, 8.
49. See J. W. Knott, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22; M. Lynch, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22; and A. F. Parkinson, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22.
50. T. Flew, *SMH*, June 25, 1992, 22.
51. S. Cole, *SMH*, May 15, 1992, 12.
52. P. Rogers, *Australian*, April 27, 1992, 8; M. Q. Brady, "Twists and turns," *Australian*, April 28, 1992, 8; K. Sowada, *Australian*, May 16-17, 1992, 18; J. C. Jenkins, *Australian*, May 22, 1992, 18; B. Eddy, June 23, 1992, 12; P. Rogers, *Australian*, June 24, 1992, 12; S. Black, "Life of a diary," *Australian*, July 6, 1992, 14; H. Bolles, *Australian*, July 13, 1992, 8; P. Rogers, *Australian*, July 13, 1992, 8; M. Bissaker, *Australian*, July 13, 1992, 8.
53. Q. Dempster, "What was on the menu at the Dempster dinner," *Australian*, July 8, 1992, 14.
54. See for example, N. Churches, *Australian*, April 22, 1992, 10.
55. J. F. Fraser, *Australian*, April 25-26, 1992, 16.
56. See J. J. McDermott, *Australian*, June 26, 1992, 15.
57. *ibid.*
58. L. J. M. Cooray, "Greiner's milksops were beaten by bully boys," *Australian*, June 29, 1992, 8.
59. *ibid.*
60. *ibid.*
61. *ibid.*
62. B. Hobbins, *Australian*, July 3, 1992, 10.
63. See G. W. Roberts, *Australian*, June 23, 1992, 12.
64. M. Taylor, *DTM*, May 15, 1992, 28; J-A. Simone, *DTM*, May 15, 1992, 28; G. Storrier, *DTM*, June 23, 1992, 26. Dempster was accused of biased reporting (Taylor); and racism (Simone). The latter suggested that he be

sacked and his “never trust a Hungarian” statement be investigated by race relations authorities. Storrier called for an inquiry into Dempster’s dinner party which was attended by Metherell and an ICAC employee, Nigel Powell.

65. J. Heddle, “Critic under fire over ICAC ruling,” *DTM*, June 25, 1992, 36. Heddle argued that Jones had selectively used sections of the ICAC report to back-up his on-air criticisms of Temby and his findings.
66. R. Stewart, *DTM*, May 15, 1992, 28.
67. L. Joyce, *DTM*, June 23, 1992, 26.
68. Mrs Sharri, *DTM*, June 24, 1992, 35.
69. P. Macdonald, *DTM*, August 25, 1992, 8.

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